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## Controversy over dismissal of BYU professor from Mormon Studies

Posted by [\\*Stephen O. Smoot](#) | [9 comments](#)



Daniel C. Peterson is a professor of Islamic Studies and Arabic at BYU, where he also serves as editor in chief of the Middle Eastern Texts Initiative.

Recent controversy involving BYU's Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship has led to the dismissal of Daniel C. Peterson, a professor Islamic Studies and Arabic at BYU, as editor of the Institute's flagship publication, the *Mormon Studies Review*. The dismissal of Peterson as well as other members of his editorial team — Louis C. Midgley, George Mitton, Gregory L. Smith, and Robert B. White — comes on the heels of an increasingly public spectacle between John Dehlin, the proprietor of the Mormon Stories podcast series and internet website, and the Institute.

The Neal A. Maxwell Institute, formerly the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS), incorporated into BYU in 1998 after years of independent research and publication. FARMS has been, and still is now, mostly recognized for its apologetic material in defense of the faith claims of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The Neal A. Maxwell Institute has also produced scholarship

on non-Mormon religious subjects, including the translation and digitization of ancient Jewish, Christian, and Muslim religious texts. Before his mid-June dismissal, Daniel C. Peterson had been editor of the *Mormon Studies Review* (formerly the *FARMS Review*) for nearly two and a half decades.

John Dehlin has been operating his Mormon Stories podcast series for years, and is known for his discussions of troublesome issues in Mormon history and theology. Dehlin, according to his website, “seeks to create online and in-person environments that allow for authentic self-expression and the open discussion of Mormonism” and provide a community of support for members of the Church who may feel outside the mainstream of Mormon orthodoxy. Dehlin has also spoken publicly of his disagreement with LDS leaders on issues such as the Church’s position on same-sex marriage.

Both the Maxwell Institute (including specifically Professor Peterson) as well as Dehlin have their fair share of critics and supporters. Critics have vocally accused Peterson and his associates of bias and ad hominem attacks against those who voice criticisms of orthodox LDS beliefs, while critics of Mormon Stories have vigorously decried John Dehlin as an anti-Mormon critic attempting to undermine confidence in Church leaders and policies. On the other hand, supporters of the Maxwell Institute have maintained that the Institute provides important responses to anti-Mormon attacks against the Church, while supporters of Dehlin affirm his sincere desire to help those who may struggle with reconciling their faith with perceived problems in Mormonism.

Since joining BYU, the Maxwell Institute has tried to find a balance between its apologetic endeavors and its other religious scholarship. Some, including the Institute’s current Executive Director M. Gerald Bradford, were concerned that what they saw as the sometimes-aggressive nature of the apologetic material produced by the Institute was compromising the Institute’s respectability as a scholarly body. Other members of the Institute, led especially by Peterson, insisted that it was imperative that the Institute continue publishing apologetic material to answer criticisms of Mormonism.

This tension and clash of ideologies within the Maxwell Institute came to a head when an anonymous source inside the Institute leaked material to Dehlin, advising him that Gregory Smith, one of the co-editors of the *Mormon Studies Review*, had prepared a detailed, heavily-referenced critique of Dehlin’s online material and podcast series. Dehlin responded by e-mailing a member of the First Quorum of the Seventy in late March and asking “if this is this something that you feel is appropriate for FARMS to do?” Noting that his source reported that the Institute was preparing a “hit piece” against him, Dehlin denounced the article (which he had not then, and still has not read) and warned, “If such a piece is, indeed, in the works — I would like notice so that I can contact Elder [Apostle] as well. My guess is that he wouldn’t approve of this either.”

According to a source close to the controversy, shortly after this e-mail exchange (in which Peterson and other Mormon scholars were included by carbon-copy), Peterson was made away of a top-level BYU administrator requesting that the article not be published. Peterson and his team complied, and prevented the article in question from being published. Shortly thereafter, rumors began spreading wildly on the internet regarding the content of Smith’s review, the alleged involvement of General Authorities, and, later, the reason behind the dismissal of Peterson as editor of the *Mormon Studies Review*, with Dehlin actively participating on different message boards and Peterson responding on his personal blog.

The entire episode, it seems, was the latest symptom of an already deeply-rooted division within the Institute. Were these sort of responses necessary in order to identify and respond to questionable and problematic claims made by critics of the Church, or were they nothing more than *ad hominem* attacks against those who had disagreements with the Church? Furthermore, was it necessary at all to respond directly to the critics of the Church, or should the Institute merely publish non-apologetic scholarship and no longer make responding to criticisms of the Church a priority?

Bradford’s decision to dismiss Peterson (the details behind which are still forthcoming) was leaked in mid-June by an inside source who informed an ardently antagonist ex/anti-Mormon message board within hours of the message being sent to Peterson. “I remain convinced that the time has come for us to take the Review in a different direction,” said Bradford in his June 14 e-mail to Peterson, while Peterson was outside of the country. “What we need to do to properly affect this change in the Review is to ask someone else... who has a comparable vision to my own for what it can accomplish, to edit the publication and devote whatever time it takes to make this happen.” Bradford concluded his e-mail by declaring that “the recently christened Mormon Studies Review is going to chart a new course, with a new editorial team, one that will bring it explicitly in-line with the scholarly agenda of the Institute.”

Peterson responded that day with a brusque reply: “You’ve achieved your goal. I resign. I resign as Director of Advancement [a fundraising position in the Institute], effective immediately. You’ve already fired me as editor of the Mormon Studies Review.” An understandably upset Peterson predicted that this decision would become “an absolutely spectacular propaganda triumph for those who oppose the Institute and despise me” and insisted that “this as an utterly wrong-headed and disastrous decision, and [I] will not pretend to support it.”

Peterson’s dismissal was publicly announced by the Institute on its website on June 22. The public reaction to the news was pronounced and diverse. Blogs, message boards, Facebook and other online media networks flared with a buzz of activity. Many individuals praised, booed, and expressed perplexity over the decision. True to his prediction, Peterson’s antagonists hailed the decision as a vindication of their already negative views of him and the Institute. At the same time, supporters of Peterson voiced their outrage over the decision and denounced it as nothing more than an underhanded power move by Bradford. The public discourse on the appropriateness of the Institute’s decision remains hotly discussed online, with individuals both inside and outside of the decision, and the controversy leading up to it, voicing their opinions.

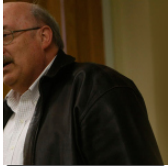
As of now, the future of the Maxwell Institute remains uncertain. The *Mormon Studies Review* has been indefinitely put on hiatus while a

new editorial team is composed. Smith's article remains unpublished, and, for the most part, unread by all but a few involved in controversy (Dehlin included). Some have speculated that the piece may be published by the Foundation for Apologetic Information and Research (FAIR), an apologetic group similar to FARMS, of which Smith is also a member. Scott Gordon, president of FAIR, has denied any intention of FAIR to publish the article with a short statement: "I know of no current plans [within FAIR] to do so." Smith has not approached FAIR about publishing, or asked them to do so.

As summarized by William J. Hamblin, a professor of history at BYU, former member of FARMS, and friend of Peterson who strongly opposes the decision of the Institute: "The Maxwell Institute (MI) controversy is not—or at least shouldn't be—a personal feud. It is, rather, a clash about the fundamental vision for the future of the MI."

*\*The author is a member of FAIR.*

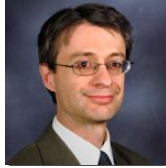
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A fair and accurate summary of the events. I really think the Institute is going in the wrong direction here and that the whole affair was handled very poorly.

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2. [Hales Swift](#) / [July 31, 2012](#)

This change basically takes the institute from doing something worthwhile to something very few people actually care about. Not to knock the Mormon studies crowd, but I wouldn't bother to read a journal about generic Mormon Studies over something that enlightens my understanding of the scriptures and that I can use to explain the gospel and help those who have encountered criticisms of the church which they don't have the information and background to process.

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o. [Trevor Antley](#) / [August 6, 2012](#)

Had the Maxwell Institute's publications not engaged in gross personal attacks on people in a completely unprofessional manner, perhaps things may have turned out differently. For what it's worth I think that the new direction may produce much more scholarly material worthy of BYU than many of the articles that FARMS has been producing in the past.